



## Holly Shissler

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**Holly Shissler**

*NELC, University of Chicago*

**"Islam and Nationalism in the Late Ottoman Empire: Perspectives of an Emigre from the Russian Empire"**

**Wednesday, January 18, 2006  
3:30 p.m.**

**Mershon Center  
Room 120**

*This lecture is open to the public.*

*Sponsored by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies  
Center, the Department of History, and the Mershon  
Center for International Security Studies.*

Holly Schissler is a historian of the Near East with special interest on the Ottoman Empire . Her current research focuses on the intellectual history of the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic . In her talk at the Mershon Center , Schissler examined the relationship between Islam and nationalism in the minds of the Turkic intellectuals in the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 20 th century and focused on the perspective of a Muslim emigré from the Russian Empire, Ahmet Agaoglu.

Schissler's research goes against conventional beliefs about late Ottoman intellectuals and modernization of the Turkish Republic . First, though the Republican founders of Turkey certainly aimed for a break with the past, as evidenced by political and social features they implemented, their policies with regard to religion displayed a more nuanced stance than is often argued. Rather than doing away with or suppressing religion, predominantly Islam, in public life, the modernizers of the Turkish elite sought to take control of religion. In other words, their principal goal was to put the state in the driver's seat and bring about a more modernist interpretation of religion that was more in line with the Republican project. Their attempts to integrate Islam and progress was part and parcel of the Turkish elite's idea that the Ottoman Empire, and later Turkey, had fallen away from progress and that Turkey embrace change, such as those in rational thought, modern science, secularization, and last but not least, a modern national identity for the Turks. Schissler argued that rationalism and secularism need not mean atheism in this context, but rather a rationalist interpretation of Islam as well as of the world.

Further, Schissler argued that in the debate on the relationship between Islam and national identity in the late Ottoman Empire , a neat distinction between a traditional, conservative Islamic movement and a progressive, nationalist movement cannot be made. The distinctions are not as neat as one might believe. Many scholars who are often viewed as defenders of Islam in that age, such as Ahmet Hilmi, were actually very critical of the established religious classes while philosophers who tend to be seen as modernizing (Turkish) nationalists, such as Ziya Gökalp and Namik Kemal, did not think that religion needed to be abandoned for the sake of progress. On the contrary, said Schissler, they saw religion and national identity as symbiotic, though they thought a more modernist interpretation of Islam was necessary for the contemporary age.

In the wider debate on nationalism and Islam in the late Ottoman Empire , émigrés from the Russian Empire played a significant role, Schissler argued. These were Turkic Muslims mainly from the Caucasus who had fled their homelands because of Russian occupation. The experience of Muslims under Russian rule led them to adopt an ethno-national, or, Turkic, identity, which was less prevalent in Muslim Turks in the Ottoman Empire .

Schissler looked specifically at the writings of Ahmet Agaoglu, one of these émigrés. Coming from the Azerbaijan , where many of the Muslim institutions and traditional practices were replaced by the Russians, Agaoglu was a person in search of his own identity. He first combined an imperial identity with a religious one, calling himself a "Russian Muslim." He then shifted his views and saw Persia and its Shiism as forces that could confront Western influences. To Agaoglu, one could see the persistence of pre-Islamic elements in Persia . Also, Shiite Islam was distinct from Sunni Islam, which he considered to be principally Arab and Semitic in nature, said Schissler.

Studying at a French university in Paris under the guidance of French theorist Ernest Renan, Agaoglu was deeply influenced by his eccentric mentor's philosophical outlook. In his theory of national cultures, Renan argued that there existed three stages of man and only Indo-European cultures were able to make a successful transition to the final stage of synthesis and achieve an advanced civilization. In contrast to Aryans, the Semitic culture was stagnant and backward. Agaoglu tried to construct an Aryan identity by focusing on the Persian culture, seeing them as capable of becoming modern.

The final and most important change in Agaoglu's thinking came when he pinned his hopes on the stronger Ottoman Empire rather than semi-colonial Persia . He declared himself to be a Turk and a Turkist. Other reasons for adopting this new identity, Schissler argued, were the growing interest in the teaching of modern subjects and popular languages, such as Azeri Turkish instead of Persian, and efforts to minimize the Sunni-Shiite strife in the Muslim world. Above everything else, Agaoglu's interest focused on the condition of the Turkish world, which brought him into the debate on the nationalist question in Islam.

Schissler explained that the Turkish world was weak at the time and Agaoglu's concern was to develop the proper steps that needed to be taken for Turkish revival. He argued that Turks had always conquered peoples that were more advanced and as a result, assimilated to them, instead of assimilating the conquered people. For example, Turkish men of letters preferred to write in

Persian or Arabic rather than in Turkish.

Schissler interpreted Agaoglu's principal argument was that only people with a national consciousness could be part of the mainstream civilization and that Turks needed to be culturally awakened both in the Ottoman Empire and other states such as the Russian Empire and Persia and adopt a national identity of their own if they were to achieve power and modernity. And in this task, Turkish intellectuals had an important role to play.

Agaoglu's theory conflicted with traditionalists who claimed Islam and nationalism to be incompatible. Agaoglu responded to this with a powerful critique. His argument was twofold. First, contrary to conservative, religious thinking, there existed no Islamic *ummah* in the world which nationalism now threatened to divide. Instead, there were various Muslim peoples who did not collectively form united front.

More importantly, said Schissler, Agaoglu believed that the conservative Islamic argument served to encourage one Muslim nation to subsume to another; in this case Turks to Arabs. He thought these traditionalist thinkers misunderstood nation, religion, and the link between the two. By failing to see that there was no overriding Islamic identity but the existence of different nations, their theory was only derailing people from progress. For Agaoglu, national identity was the shape of things to come, and blindly clinging to an abstract *ummah* only weakened the Turkish world, and ultimately, the Islamic world as well.

Nationalism tends to be associated today with exclusionism and ethnic cleansing, but historically, it had a liberal side as well. For the intellectual thinkers of the late Ottoman Empire, nationalism implied popular sovereignty, representative political institutions and capitalist development. In fact, Turkish nationalism was closely linked to progress in various guises: scientific, political and economic.

In sum, Agaoglu and other Ottoman thinkers at the turn of the century saw religion and national identity as symbiotic and reciprocal and not in opposition to each other. A more rational Islam that was free of the dogmatism and self-interested interpretation of the established *ulema* class and that was also suited to the needs of the current age was an essential part of the national identity. The question was how to maintain your roots as you modernized: i.e. how to modernize without Westernizing.

The grand project of the Turkists in this period was a cultural rather than a political one. In other words, they deemed the cultural awakening of Turks across Eurasia as the principal goal, not the founding of a grand Turkish state which encompasses all the areas they lived, which remained as a dream, at least until the Russian Revolution of 1917.

It is also important to note that Turkic émigrés to the Ottoman Empire from the Russian Empire was more inclined to engage in this nationalist enterprise than the Ottoman Turks. Put differently, the nationalist mode of thinking largely came with these émigrés. The reason is twofold. First, because they were émigrés, these Turks had less commitment to the geographical specificity of the Ottoman Empire. Although they were certainly committed to the preservation and success of the Empire, they were naturally not as emotionally committed to its specific regions. And secondly, again due to their émigré status, they were by definition from territories under occupation. Having experienced direct Russian colonization, and not just indirect economic domination or external pressure, these Turks knew how national identity mattered to them. They were also much more aware that the moment for Ottomanism had passed. In other words, the Ottoman ideal of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire was no longer compelling in the early 20 th century. And if the Turks were to survive and recover, developing a national identity was absolutely essential. Islamic unity was also a dream and Turks needed to have their national consciousness if they were to be modern, independent and powerful.

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Holly Shissler received her BA in Anthropology from Vassar College and her Ph.D. in Near Eastern History from UCLA. Her research focuses on the intellectual history of the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic. Her book *Between Two Empires: Ahmet Aaolu and the New Turkey* appeared in 2003 from I. B. Tauris. She is currently on leave from the University of Chicago's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and is a Keddie-Balzan Fellow in the Department of History at UCLA.